THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING DIGITAL PHOTO MAGAZINE

14-20 SEPTEMBER 2023 ISSUE 573

Photography week

INSPIRATION | IDEAS | IN-DEPTH REVIEWS

REVIEW: NIKKOR Z DX 24MM F/1.7

WE GO WALKABOUT WITH NIKON'S FAST DX WIDE-ANGLE PRIME

GIG ECONOMY

LEARN HOW TO CAPTURE ACTION-PACKED IMAGES OF LIVE MUSIC WITH TIPS FROM A PRO

VISIT…

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Photography week

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Welcome to the world's No.1 weekly digital photography magazine. If you're already a reader, thanks for your continued support and involvement; if you're new to *Photography Week*, you've come to the right place! In addition to expert advice, brilliant tips and step-by-step tutorials, every issue features interactive galleries of brilliant photos, how-to videos on essential shooting and editing techniques, and in-depth reviews of the latest camera kit.

But that's not the whole story. *Photography Week* is more than a magazine – it's a community of like-minded people who are passionate about photography. To get involved, just follow any of the links below and share your shots and comments.

Jeff Meyer, Editor

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We're more than just a magazine – read on and discover the many ways you can interact with and enjoy *Photography Week*

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REVIEW

NIKKOR Z DX 24MM F/1.7

Need a fast and compact walkabout lens that won't break the bank? We hit the streets with Nikon's wide-angle prime for DX mirrorless cameras.

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Cover image © Getty

THE NEW GOPRO HERO 12 BLACK GOES BIG ON AUDIO

The iconic action cam gets an external mic and dual-channel audio

© GoPro

GoPro has announced the Hero 12 Black, with audio-focused headline upgrades including external microphone support and dual-channel audio capture, so that you can record both camera and external mic tracks and then mix them in an edit. The latest GoPro also sports a handy ¼-inch thread between its flip-out feet, giving you even more ways to mount it, and the addition of HDR video, while 8:7 capture in all modes, boosts its imaging credentials too.

It's no secret that many were hoping this would be the year GoPro improved its low-light performance and upped the sensor size nearer to that coveted 1-inch mark, as DJI with its 1/1.3-inch Osmo Action 4. But GoPro has kept the 1/1.9-inch sensor introduced on the GoPro Hero 11 Black.

DJI laid down the gauntlet with its wireless audio support for its Action devices, and compatibility with its excellent DJI Mic, and GoPro has finally stepped up its wireless audio game with support for Bluetooth microphones – either in the form of earbuds or dedicated solutions. Voice commands and external audio are all heard by the Hero 12 Black's Bluetooth input, so hands-free control over the camera at a distance should be easier than ever, and with dual-channel capture, both camera and microphone audio are recorded. Whether using it with a helmet or mixing down in-car and out-of-car audio, this should unlock freedom never before available in the GoPro ecosystem.

This dual-channel capture isn't just useful for wireless microphones. If you have the GoPro Hero 12 Black

paired with a GoPro MediaMod, it can simultaneously record front and rear microphone audio, and you can mix both in the edit – ideal for interactions or vlogging in a bustling location.

The Hero 12 Black also introduces Timecode sync, making it much easier for editors to switch between multiple cameras and manage clips.

The headline video feature this year is HDR, pulling back blown-out skies and drawing extra detail from shadows in high-contrast scenes.

Like its predecessor, the Hero 12 Black captures video at up to 5.3K resolution at 60 frames per second (fps), or 4K resolution, 120fps in standard video mode. If you're happy to switch to slow-mo, this caps out at 2.7k at 240fps.

Video editors and fans of log capture and LUTs will appreciate GoPro's new GP-Log mode and custom LUTs. This should make it easier to tune footage from your Hero 12 Black and splice it into a multi-camera workflow.

The Hero 11 Black introduced GoPro's 27MP, 8:7 sensor, and it returns here, this time introducing HyperSmooth 6.0, which adds a new feature called AutoBoost. This analyses the field of view and automatically adjusts stabilisation accordingly while bringing back 360-degree horizon lock.

© GoPro

Photos can be pulled from full-res videos at up to 24.7MP or captured natively at 27MP. The Hero 12 Black has also been upgraded with a new light painting photo feature, which creates an time-bending image in addition to the stylised light painting video mode introduced on the Hero 11 Black.

We loved the versatility GoPro's 8:7 sensor brought to the Hero 11 Black, and the Hero 12 Black extends its capabilities, introducing a vertical video mode for dedicated portrait capture and adding an 8:7 aspect ratio recording option to all shooting modes.

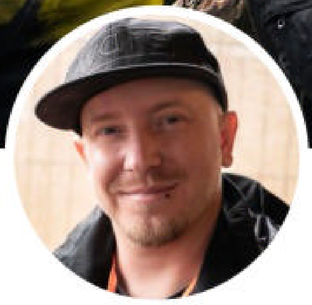
© GoPro

While the battery spec of GoPro's latest cam hasn't changed – the Hero 12 Balck still ships with an Enduro battery – you can expect longer capture times from a single charge, with GoPro stating 70 minutes at 5.3K 60fps, and 58 minutes at 4K 120fps.

GoPro has also announced two accessories: a new Max Lens Mod 2.0, which works with the Hero 12 Black to eke out an even wider field of view, and an Extension Pole + Waterproof Shutter Remote.

The GoPro Hero 12 Black will cost £399.99 / $399.99, which is the lowest list we've seen from a Hero Black in years. While GoPro customers could access this price for the Hero 11 Black, it required a GoPro subscription. Now, there's just one simple price for the camera itself – though accessories retain GoPro's subscription discount model – the Max Lens Mod 2.0 costs £99.99 (or £79.99 for GoPro subscribers).

Both the camera and Lens Mod are available to preorder on GoPro.com until September 13, when both will go on sale globally. And if you want to pick up the MediaMod, Light Mod, and GoPro Volta with the 12 Black, the GoPro Hero 12 Black Creator Edition bundles them togetherfor £599.99 / $599.99.



THE PRO
MATT HIGGS
CAMERA: NIKON D780

Matt has never strayed far from music or photography. He started his career in music PR, but soon moved onto Practical Photography magazine and its sister title Digital Photo.

All the while he was pursuing his passion for gig photography, and following a brief stint in content marketing, he finally embarked on a career as a freelance pro. He's toured with rock royalty, worked as an official photographer for Download Festival, and served on sets as a camera operator.

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SHOTS THAT ROCK

We throw a budding music photographer lens-first into the photo 'pit' with pro Matt Higgs

THE APPRENTICE
CHARLES PALMER
CAMERA: NIKON Z 6

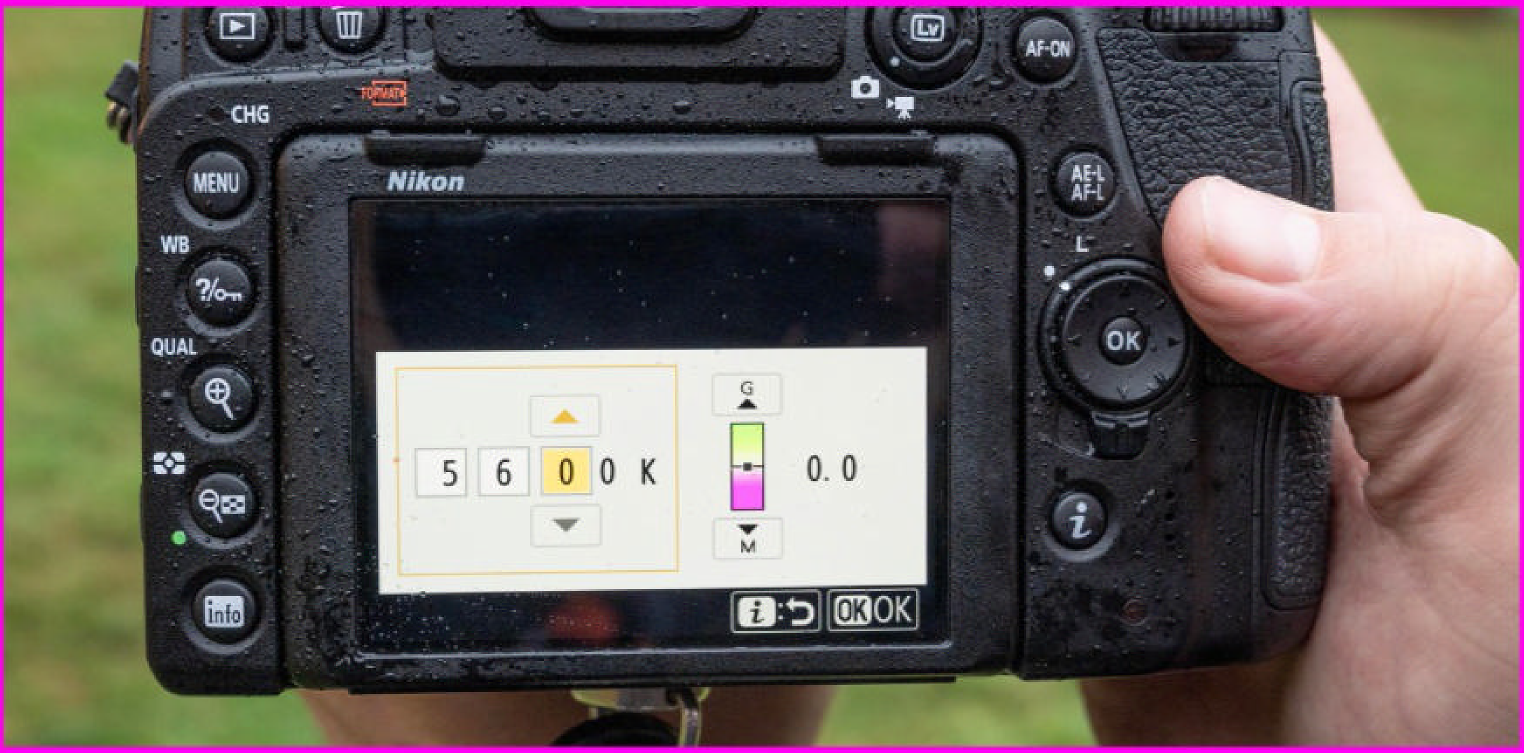
Charles is a UX designer for The Open University. His interest in photography dates back to his childhood, when he was gifted a Kodak Instamatic. He bought his first SLR at college, but it wasn't until the past few years that he decided to start taking his hobby more seriously. He's stayed within the Nikon ecosystem since buying a D50, and was an early mirrorless adopter, picking up the Z 6 at launch. He's had lots of experience shooting his local music scene, and is looking for some pro tips so that he can step up to larger venues and gigs.

TECHNIQUE ASSESSMENT

Matt showed Charles how to set up his camera to help him capture great gig shots

TAKE CONTROL

Matt says... Stage lights are constantly changing, so I need consistency, and for that reason I shoot entirely in Manual mode. I tend to shoot wide-open, and I never dip below 1/200 sec. Modern cameras and editing software makes high ISOs more palatable – and more preferable – to a blurry shot.



CONSISTENT KELVINS

Matt says... You can get away with Auto White Balance most of the time, but occasionally the stage lighting will confuse the camera. To prevent this I like to manually set my white balance to a neutral 5600K, so I get consistent results. That said, you should always shoot raw so that you can adjust the colour temperature in post if needed.

SPOT'S THE DIFFERENCE

Matt says... My main concern is that the subject is exposed correctly – you can retain detail in an underexposed background, but an overexposed subject is a different matter. Spot metering allows you to expose for the subject, but it does take practice to master this mode, as the light meter is constantly changing.

CAMERA Nikon Z 6 **LENS** 70-200 f/2.8
EXPOSURE 1/250 sec, f/3.2, ISO400

The Todd in the Hole Festival hosts dozens of artists across multiple stages for an annual three-day music extravaganza in Stevenage, UK (www.toddinthehole.co.uk). Its intimate atmosphere combined with impressive production values made it the perfect place for professional gig photographer and videographer Matt Higgs to take Charles for a live-music boot camp.

"I think you're going to have to improvise a rain cover," said Matt as he handed Charles a press pass and they stepped from under the entrance marquee and into the pouring rain. Two thumps from a bass drum, the rattle of a guitar chord and a sound engineer saying, "One, two… one two…" boomed from the main stage. In just 30 minutes, local band Electric Black were scheduled to kick off proceedings, but for now, any revellers who had turned up early were huddled in the various food and drink tents around the arena, and Matt and Charles elected to join them.

Luckily, Charles had picked up a freezer bag en route to serve as a makeshift rain cover, and once he'd secured it in place under his lens hood, they used the downtime to go through a few camera settings. "We won't be able to hear ourselves think in the pit," said Matt, "so let's sort your settings while we can."

"I tend to use Aperture Priority mode," said Charles. "I always use Manual mode," replied Matt. "But I look at it this way: the key to gig photography is being able to change your settings on the fly to react to what's happening on-stage. It doesn't matter whether you shoot Aperture Priority, Auto ISO or fully manual; if you're in control and can react quickly enough that's good enough for me.

"What about aperture?"

"I shoot wide open," Charles replied. "Excellent," said Matt. "You'll have a bit more play today because of the ambient lighting, but I mostly shoot wide open too. In fact, my method is to select my aperture, then guess roughly what shutter speed I can get away with, and then I tend to ride the ISO more than anything, while I'm in the pit."

An announcer's voice travelled across the arena as he introduced the first band, so the photographers made a dash for the main stage through the rain.

Double act

"You've got your 70-200mm attached," Matt pointed out to Charles as they traipsed across the field. "The stage isn't very high, so you could probably get away with using a 24-70mm all day."

"Darn, there's no way I can change it now we're out in the elements," said Charles.

"This is why I always recommend picking up a second body," Matt shouted over the noise of the crowd. "Some people probably think it's an ego thing, walking around with two cameras, but when you only have three songs to get your shots – not to mention the fact that there will be various fluids and dust flying about – swapping lenses isn't an option.

CAMERA Nikon Z 6
LENS 24-70mm f/2.8
EXPOSURE 1/320 sec, f/2.8, ISO400

EXPERT INSIGHT
NEGATIVE SPACE, A POSITIVE

Matt says… Stages are messy places, filled with equipment, VIP bystanders, other photographers, rigging… the list goes on. If you're shooting a portrait of a performer, you'll want the background to be as clean as possible, so nothing detracts from the subject. This also affords you the opportunity to play with negative space. If you frame your subject too tightly the composition will feel restrictive, so a little space provides room for it to breathe. A great time to shoot portraits is when smoke is pumped onto the stage, since it obscures busy backgrounds.

On a normal shoot, I'll have my 24-70mm on one camera body and my 14-24mm or 70-200mm on the other."

The pair showed a security guard their passes, and he let them through the barrier and into the pit. "Don't worry," said Matt as he tucked his camera bag away. "I'd use a 70-200mm to get a portrait of the drummer, so consider that your first assignment." Charles nodded as the sound of clashing drum sticks prompted Electric Black to launch into their set of US-inspired rock.

With ample daylight to work with, Charles was able to stay in and around ISO400 and still maintain an acceptably fast shutter speed. Once he'd captured a handful of portraits of the lead singer, lead guitarist and bassist, he moved onto the drummer.

In a rare moment of downtime between songs, Matt rushed over to Charles and signalled to him to remove his nearest earplug. "Watch that the cymbals don't obscure his face," he shouted, before the unmistakable intro riff of Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Fortunate Son* chimed across the arena to the delight of the crowd, and Charles quickly stuffed the plug back into his ear.

With no other band member obstructing his field of view, Charles was able to zero in on the animated drummer. The ambient light meant he could afford to shoot at f/3.2 to give himself a little extra depth of field and, as he looked through the optical viewfinder, he adjusted the frame until the crash cymbal was away from the musician's face. He fired a burst and captured the drummer mid-headbang, stick held aloft and away from his face, with a nice purple rim light to separate the subject from the background. Hot Shot #1 was already in the bag.

As soon as the band had finished, Matt and Charles made for cover, and took the opportunity to wipe down their gear as best they could. Charles took the chance to attach his Nikon AF-S 24-70mm f/2.8E ED VR to his Z 6 via the FTZ adapter. "Great," said Matt. "Even with that you'll be able to capture a few portraits at the telephoto end."

Manual mode ensures consistency when shooting in strobe lighting

One stop beyond

A Madness tribute band called Badness was up next. The rain still hadn't subsided, but the band's jolly presence was enough to tempt even fairweather concert goers from the shelter of the beer tents.

"Try to get a good shot of each band member – they've got bags of character," said Matt as the saxophonist pulled faces at the crowd to cheers and laughter.

The strobe lighting was more intense than for Electric Black's set. And to complicate matters further, every band member was wearing a white suit adorned with newspaper print – a nod to the Madness single *(Waiting For) The Ghost Train* – which was easily blown out.

This prompted Charles to switch from Matrix to Matt's preferred spot metering so he could expose for the performers. Matt had already explained that he used single-point AF and continuous AF to target subjects by moving the focus point around the scene via his D780's D-pad. "There's nothing wrong with AF tracking," he told Charles, "I just don't trust it in the moment with performers jumping around and strobe lighting peppering the stage."

But Charles wasn't having any trouble focusing, and now that he'd switched to Spot Metering he was confidently nailing each exposure. The next problem was the lead singer's microphone. His convincingly erratic performance already made it difficult to time each burst, and if the performer was caught at the wrong angle, his microphone covered half his face.

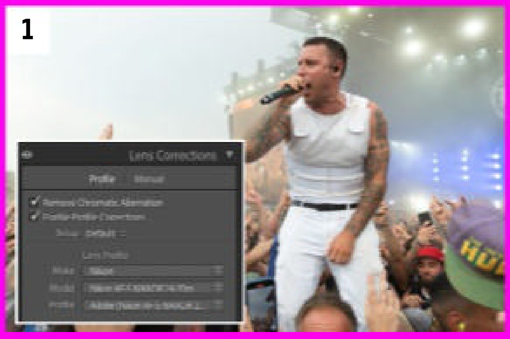
Charles kept trying to think of Matt's pointers as the piano intro to *It Must Be Love* sent the crowd into another loud cheer. "Keep the background clean and look out for singers holding notes – they often pull the mic away from their mouth."

Knowing that the ballad would temper the band's energetic tempo, Charles got as close to the stage as possible, and zoomed into 70mm to isolate the singer as he glided about the stage. As the chorus began, a little smoke was pumped onto the stage and amplified a spotlight behind the frontman as he sang; as he held the late note of the chorus he pulled the mic away from his mouth, allowing Charles to capture Hot Shot #2.

Work all the angles

Following a well-received pop punk set from Green Days to warm up the crowd further, it was time for Rick Parfitt Jnr and the RPJ Band. Rick is

HOW TO: EDIT LIVE MUSIC



1

DITCH THE DISTORTION

Matt says... The first thing I nearly always do when processing an image is tick Lightroom's Enable Profile Corrections checkbox. This helps to remove any distortions and vignetting created by the lens when capturing the photo, producing a more natural result and a good base for any further edits.

2

DON'T BLOW IT

Matt says... With various light sources coming in from different directions (stage lights and ambient), your exposure is never going to be perfect in-camera. Normally, shadows will need lifting to reveal more midtones, and highlights reducing so direct light sources don't blow out performers.

3

TWEAK THE TEMP

Matt says... Light sources of varying colour temperatures, gels and reflective surfaces mean it's not unusual to have to tweak a file's white balance for a more pleasing look. It's personal taste, but I aim to maintain natural skin tones as far as possible.

CAMERA Nikon Z 6
LENS 24-70mm f/2.8
EXPOSURE 1/800 sec, f/2.8, ISO1600

the son of the late, legendary Status Quo guitarist, and he had played the festival the year before. As the arena became more cramped – in spite of the rain – it was clear that the audience was bracing itself for something good.

"These guys are loads of fun," said Matt. "You'll get a good couple of chances at landing a jumping shot, so give yourself some room by mixing things up with some wider compositions. You might be able to get two or three members of the band in the same shot. The trick is to get really close to the stage so that you can still fill the frame. And don't worry about barrel distortion; it'll add to the shots."

Charles held his hand out and removed his makeshift rain cover. "I think it's stopped," he said with a smile. "That's a relief," said Matt. "Just make sure you keep your lens hood on to help block the strobes from flaring." As Charles secured his lens hood, the crowd roared as the announcer appeared again.

"Oh, and the singer likes to jump into the crowd," Matt shouted as Charles secured his earplugs and gave a thumbs-up as the band thundered into their first number.

Rick Parfitt Jnr bounded onto the stage with all the vigour of an adolescent golden Labrador and, sure enough, jumped right off the four-foot stage and hopped up onto the barrier that separated the crowd. It all happened so fast that Charles could have been forgiven for fumbling his shot and missing the moment, but he calmly adjusted his zoom, upped his shutter speed to accommodate the ambient light, and fired away as the frontman crooned to the sodden-but-bouncing front rows.

Moments later and the sprightly Parfitt had jumped back up onto the stage and was offering up his microphone to a 1,000-strong choir. While few musicians could keep up with the frontman's untamed zest, the bassist's cool demeanour provided the unflappable Keith to Parfitt's Jagger and Charles was intent on capturing the pair in the same frame. The bassist kept resting his foot on a nearby floor monitor and leaning into the crowd, so Charles positioned himself to the

EXPERT INSIGHT
PICS WITH PIZZAZZ

Matt says... A good rule of thumb is to make sure that you capture a usable shot of every band member. I tend to start with the front person, as they're usually the most recognizable face in the band. I'll then move onto the lead guitarist and work back from there. Once I've bagged each member, I'll start to relax and experiment a little with my compositions and settings. But no matter what I'm doing, I'm looking out for something special: a jump, a mic swing, some guitar antics, a dance move... anything dynamic that captures the band's energy.

CAMERA Nikon Z 6
LENS 24-70mm f/2.8
EXPOSURE 1/2000 sec, f/2.8, ISO3200

musician's right and zoomed out to 24mm.

It worked, as the bassist soon pulled his signature move. Charles boosted his ISO to 1600 to account for the now quickly diminishing light, and captured Hot Shot #3 just as Parfitt entered stage-left and a strobe flared over the bassist's head.

Go ahead and jump!

After the band left the stage to rapturous applause, Charles thumbed through his playback screen. "I don't think I managed a sharp jump shot," he said. "Well, the final band is a Coldplay tribute," said Matt "and although I doubt anybody is going to match RPJ's energy tonight, we could get lucky..."

"I always get caught out," said Charles. "Me too," said Matt as they shared a laugh. "You can't be everywhere at once, but you can improve your chances by having a fast shutter speed and maintaining a wider field of view so the performer has plenty of headroom to jump high up into the frame."

When the pair returned to the pit after a quick bite, the night was beginning to draw in. "Don't be afraid to really bump up that ISO if you need to," said Matt. "Sharpness first; you can worry about noise in post."

For the last time, the crowd cheered as the musicians filtered onto the stage led by a very convincing Chris Martin lookalike. Initially, Charles found himself battling to frame the frontman at the piano, but as livelier numbers drew him onto the stage, the energy levels mounted.

At one point, Chris the doppelganger serenaded the crowd while lying on the stage floor, offering Charles the opportunity to capture what would surely become the final Hot Shot. But as the band reached its climactic rendition of *A Sky Full of Stars*, 'Chris' launched himself into the air. Luckily, Charles had already swung the odds in his favour. ISO3200 provided a lightning-fast 1/2000 sec and, at 24mm, the singer had plenty of headroom. With the AF point trained on the frontman, he fired the shutter to capture Hot Shot #4.

EXPERT INSIGHT
CROWD SURFING

Matt says... Live music photography isn't only about capturing what's happening on stage; the audience is a key part of the narrative, and some clients are more interested in the energy of the crowd than the performers. If you're working for a festival organizer, they'll have a different lineup the following year and probably won't use all that many images of past performers. But photos of crowd interaction, and the stage as a whole, are key to marketing future events. Heading into the crowd after the pit will often reap some of your most exciting and lucrative shots.

CHARLES' COMMENT

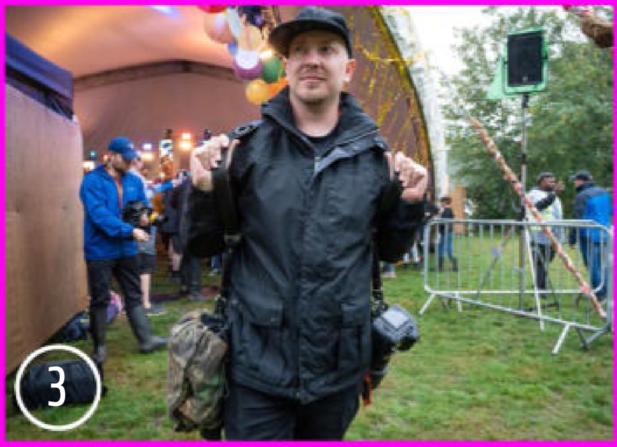
Switching to the 24-70mm really made a difference today, and shooting at the wide-angle end was a game changer – it's totally altered the way I'm thinking about composition, and it bagged me a jump shot!

MATT'S VERDICT

It's obvious that music photography is Charles' passion, so I didn't want to cover old ground. I got him to try some new things, and he excelled at everything, really. Just look at the shots!

ESSENTIAL GEAR

The kit Matt relies on for capturing top shots



1 GIG ESSENTIALS

Matt says... A press pass allows you to enter a venue with your camera kit and normally lets you access the pit, if there is one. Get to know the owners of your local venue, and offer your services to online music mags, or get in touch with smaller bands, to help you get the ball rolling. Earplugs are a must-have; standing in front of a PA system is no joke, so invest in a good-quality pair.

2 RAIN COVER

Matt says... Weather-sealing only gets you so far. If you're caught shooting a festival in a downpour – like we were today – then a rain cover can be a camera-saver! There are tons of rain covers out there in a variety of materials, sizes and with all manner of extra features, so shop around and find the one that best suits you. My preference is something nice and simple that can slip into my bag, doesn't impede camera operation and can be attached to my setup on the fly. I've had my camouflage cover for years, and it hasn't let me down yet.

3 DUAL HARNESS

Matt says... At most gigs you only get to shoot the first three songs of a set, so you really don't have time to be swapping out lenses in the pit, and nor would you want to – it's a cramped space that's full of photographers, and the occasional crowd surfer, with sweat and beer often flying about. The solution is to invest in a pair of camera bodies and a harness, so that you can swap between lenses on the fly. My harness is the HoldFast MoneyMaker, which is made from real leather and metal buckles, so it's durable and looks pretty rock 'n' roll to boot!

PRO PORTFOLIO
MATT HIGGS

FIRE STARTER
Pyrotechnics can add real drama to a photo, but they can be difficult to predict and expose for correctly in the split second they're fired. For this image, the bright conditions off-stage helped me to achieve a balanced exposure. A neat trick to help you prepare for pyro effects is to watch recent gigs on YouTube; often a band will use the same setup again.

CROWD PLEASER
Moments of interaction between artists and the crowd make for some of my favourite photographs. The atmosphere, energy and narrative captured in an image, where the gap between performer and audience is bridged, encapsulates the joy of live music for me.

FAN'S-EYE VIEW
The photography pit directly in front of the stage is excellent for capturing clean-looking compositions of artists, but if you want your images to feel really immersive nothing beats getting into the midst of the crowd and capturing the context of the fan experience.

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XPOSURE

THE WEEK'S MOST INSPIRING READER PHOTOS

ALTERNATIVE SUNSET

ALESSIA FIORENTINI

"I captured this beautiful sunset in my wing mirror as we were returning from a trip into the mountains in northern Italy."

https://bit.ly/3sHMeZM

BREAKFAST!

BRUCE ROBERTSON

"This shot was taken for a weekly challenge, for which the subject was fruit. I was preparing breakfast in my kitchen, and I thought the light falling on the fruit and bowl was special."

http://bit.ly/3TLgvAm

RICOH-363 KOLKATA VALLEY

ABHIJIT SEN

"I shot this photo in Kolkata, India. I felt that the strong contrast and bold silhouette made it a great candidate for a black-and-white treatment."

https://bit.ly/2Gd7GhI

CHINOOK HELICOPTER

JEFF GUILE

"I had taken my seven-year-old grandson out for only his second-ever camera shoot, and on the drive home we saw this Chinook hovering low over the hillside, so we quickly parked the car, jumped out and snapped away. It was the perfect ending to a great day out, and he's raring for more photography trips!"
https://bit.ly/3ceHHTi

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Taken a portrait you're particularly proud of? Shot a sensational sunset you'd like to show off? Then join the *Photography Week* Facebook community and share your best photos today! You'll get feedback from fellow readers and the *Photography Week* team, plus the chance to appear in Xposure, or even on our cover!

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- Rob P. ★★★★★

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- Dyllan E. ★★★★★

IT'S COOL, THAT

THE BEST THING WE'VE SEEN THIS WEEK

A Mother's Love by Qiuqing Mu, Bronze, Bird Behavior

Grab the Bull by the Horns by Jack Zhi, Overall Winner

More Fish Please! by Levi Fitze, Silver, Comedy Bird Photo

Glistening-green Tanager by Nicolas Reusens, Gold, Portrait

Images © The photographer and courtesy Bird Photographer of the Year

DAVID VS GOLIATH IN THE SKY AS FALCON BATTLES PELICAN

Dramatic mid-air duel wins Bird Photographer of the Year 2023

A stunning image of a female peregrine falcon battling with a pelican more that double its size as she defends her nest and chicks has won Bird Photographer of the Year 2023.

The image was captured by Jack Zhi in southern California, in an area where fights between falcons and birds trying to raid their nests are common, and the shot was one that Zhi had long been trying to get.

"For four years, I attempted to capture the rare sight of the female falcon attacking large brown pelicans with incredible speed and agility," he says of his winning image. "I love the eyes of the pelican in this image – surprised and scared. The action was fast, and over in the blink of an eye. But I'll remember that moment forever."

In addition to showcasing the best in bird photography, BPOTY also supports bird conservation projects. Click the link to see more images from this year's contest at the BPOTY website, where you can also purchase hardcover books of images.

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SHOOT MACRO WITH A TWIST

James Paterson shows you how to enhance your close-up photography by employing unusual focal lengths and lighting tricks

1 HOUR

Seen in close-up, the world reveals all kinds of hitherto unnoticed details, colours and textures. We can use an array of tricks to enhance these close-up details, and in this project we'll explore a few of those options.

For starters, we'll experiment with macro lenses of different focal lengths. A typical focal length for macro lenses is around 100mm, but you can also find more unusual lenses out there, like the 15mm wide-angle macro used for our snail photo above. It's a crazy lens that's a real challenge to use, but it offers a captivating and rewarding perspective for close-up images.

As well as altering our perspective, we can also experiment with lighting. On a bright sunny day you'll have plenty of light to play with, but it's not always the best quality for close-up photography, and we'll look at how to manipulate the daylight with a reflector in order to soften and diffuse the harsh sunlight. We'll also explain how to add in light of your own using a flashgun; like sunlight, direct flash from a flash can be harsh, so we'll make use of a small softbox for more attractive results.

There are lots of other techniques you can employ to enhance the wonderful subjects, details and textures on offer in the close-up world. From choosing the right aperture to hunting for bugs and spraying glycerin-infused water, let's take a look at some tricks of the macro trade…

THE SETUP MACRO ESSENTIALS

Here's what you need to get set up for exceptional close-up photography

1 MACRO LENS

A macro lens allows you to frame close-up subjects at 1:1 view, meaning the subject can be recorded at its actual size on the image sensor. They come in various focal lengths. At shorter focal lengths, like the 15mm used here, the subject has to be very close to the lens for a true 1:1 capture.

2 FLASHGUN

A flashgun helps to lift your subject and bring out the colours. Fired directly, the flash can be too harsh – a small softbox attachment creates more diffuse and softer light. Some photographers like to attach the flash to the camera with a bracket, but if not you can simply hold it, or use a stand.

3 5-IN-1 REFLECTOR

A reflector is useful for all kinds of photography, including macro. Held opposite the light source it can be used to bounce light back into the shadows, and it can also provide shade when the sunlight is too harsh. The diffusion panel can be useful for softening sunlight or flash.

4 TRIPOD

A tripod frees up your hands and allows you to perfect your focusing. When you're focusing it's often easiest to move the camera back and forth slightly; a focus rack is ideal for this, but if you don't have one then a sliding tripod plate – like the one on the Benro gimbal head here – can work just as well.

5 APERTURE CONTROL

Aperture is key in macro photography. At wide apertures, like f/4, the depth of field might only stretch to a few millimetres, so often it's better to stop down to f/8 or more to ensure a decent area of sharpness across your subject. Here we're in Manual mode at f/11, 1/250 sec, and ISO640.

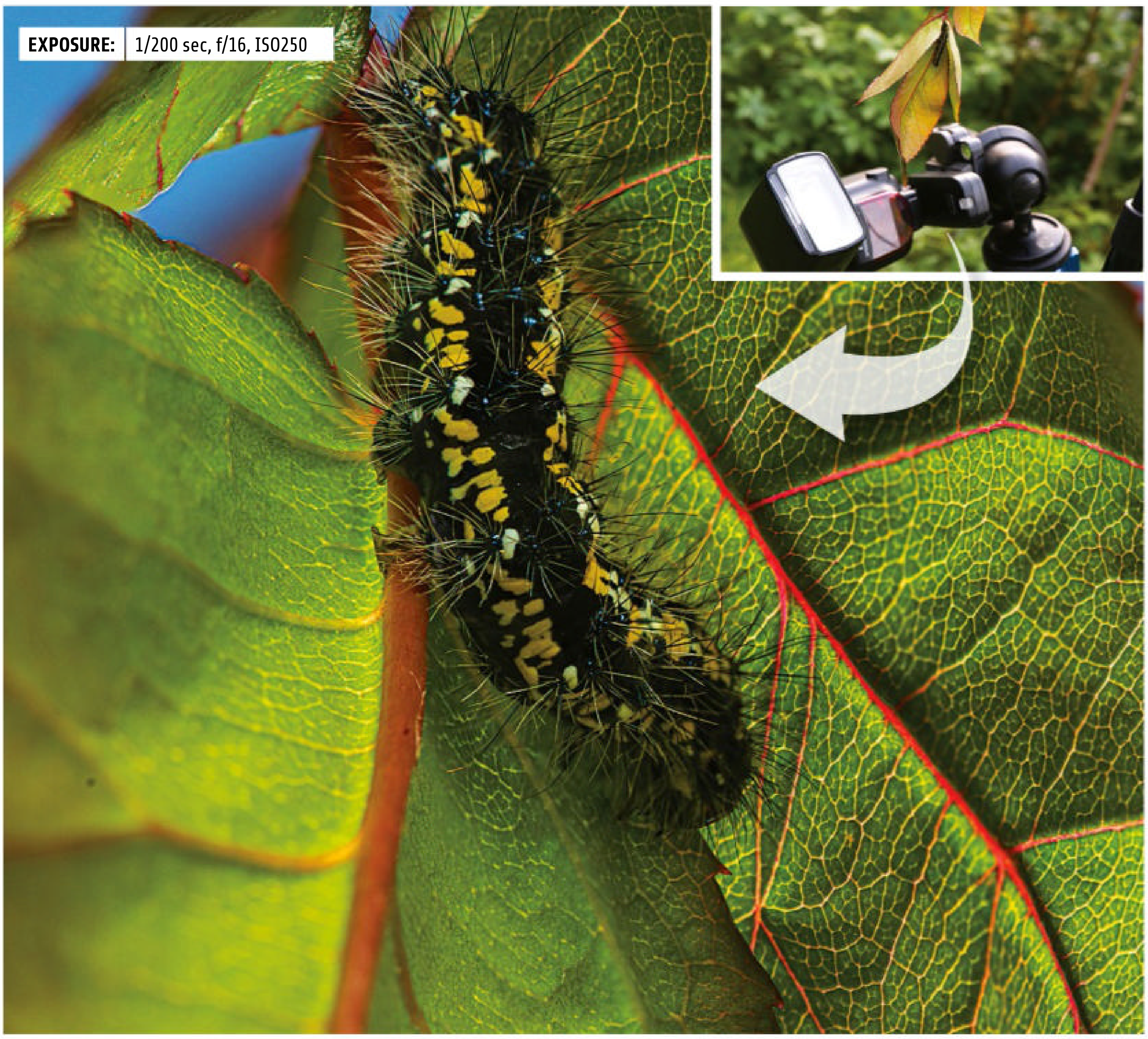
6 LIVE VIEW FOCUSING

Using Live View to compose and focus your macro shots is often the easiest way, especially if your subject is static, as you can zoom into the Live View display and manually fine-tune the focusing. If your camera has focus peaking – like our Nikon D850 here – it can overlay highlights on sharp areas, which can be helpful.

DIFFUSE THE SUNLIGHT

Direct sunlight can be problematic for macro photography. As shown in the bottom-right image here, it creates high contrast, resulting in overly bright highlights and deep shadows. Delicate, soft light is generally better, as it more gently reveals the form and colour of the subject. Fortunately, we don't have to wait for a cloud or some shade, as we can easily make our own shade, and a simple 5-in-1 reflector is ideal for the job. By zipping off the reflector sleeve and holding the internal diffusion panel between the sun and our subject we can diffuse the sunlight while not blocking it out completely, resulting in wonderful, soft, even, illumination.

Kit used: Macro lens, diffusion panel or white umbrella



OFF-CAMERA FLASH

An off-camera flash is a great addition to your macro kitbag. When you're shooting macro you'll often want to stick to narrower apertures in order to maximise depth of field – between f/11 and f/22 is usually ideal. But this inevitably means that you'll require more light, which flash can provide us with. However, it's not just about the quantity of light – using flash also enables us to get creative with the direction of it. By using a remote trigger (or a sync cable), we can place the flash behind our subject for elegant backlighting through a leaf, as you can see in the image to the left. However, too much flash can look unnatural, so for the best results keep the flash power fairly low so that the light blends naturally with the ambient light.

Kit used: Flashgun, wireless flash triggers, macro lens, tripod, light stand

TOP MACRO TIPS

WATER DROPS

Water can be a great addition to your macro shots – the bright highlights and delicate curves it adds can really elevate flower photos. To get the look of fresh rainfall, we can simply use a sprayer filled with water. Try spraying background plants too, as the little drops will catch and reflect the light, resulting in beautiful bokeh highlights in the blurred background behind your subject. If you find that the water runs off your plant too quickly, try mixing it with glycerin – this sticky substance makes the water more durable and glutinous, while still resulting in lovely droplets.

Kit used: Macro lens, tripod, flashgun, softbox, light stand, water sprayer, glycerin

FRESH PERSPECTIVES

Macro lenses come in all kinds of focal lengths, most commonly around 100mm, but if you want to try an unusual perspective you can seek out other lenses, like the specialist Laowa 15mm 1:1 used here. It's a super-wide-angle macro, so to get close enough to the subject the front element needs to be almost pressing against it. This can be hard with timid subjects, but for more placid creatures, and plants, the lens offers a unique field of view by showing both the subject and its surroundings; this sets the images apart from other macros, in which backgrounds are mostly blurred.

Kit used: Wide-angle macro lens

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BLEND WITH BRIGHTNESS

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Forget selections and masks, says James Paterson: use Blend Options to create incredible composites

If you know how to merge two photos together you can create all kinds of amazing images. It's a useful skill to learn, whether you want to make imaginative composites, or for more everyday image editing, like combining multiple exposures. The standard approach for making a composite would be to use selections to isolate the subject, then add a layer mask to remove the background. But this can be time-consuming, and sometimes there's a quicker way, as you'll discover in this video tutorial.

The Blend Options dialog in Affinity Photo lets us blend layers based on luminosity. In a way it's a bit like a layer blending mode, but with far greater control. It's ideal when you want to combine images like ours here, where one has a very bright background. Rather than painstakingly cutting out the person from the white backdrop, all we have to do is open the Blend Options dialog and knock out the highlight range, and that bright background can be removed in a couple of seconds.

There's a slight catch, however. If there are highlights in the subject – as in the shoes of our model – these will also get knocked out. The fix is simple: we duplicate the layer and remove the blend effect, then paint a simple mask to restore any missing details.

From this point, it's about making our images look as if they fit together naturally. To achieve this, we can paint shadows where they would naturally fall, and add a subtle reflection to the glass.

GEAR

LENS TEST

EXPERT OPINION ON THE LATEST KIT

LENS MOUNT: **NIKON Z (DX)**

NIKKOR Z DX 24MM F/1.7

Own-brand prime time for Nikon's APS-C format Z system cameras

www.nikon.co.uk £289/$280

The Nikkor Z DX 24mm f/1.7 is Nikon's first DX (APS-C format) prime lens specifically for cameras like the Z 30, Z 50 and Z fc. The standout feature is its f/1.7 aperture, which enables much faster shutter speeds if you're shooting in low light without needing to bump up your ISO setting. It features a minimum focus distance of just 18cm, and a generous maximum magnification ratio of 0.19x.

Build and handling

Despite weighing just 135g, the build quality is convincing. The lens is made from plastic, right down to its mounting plate, and is only 40mm long. The DX 24mm has a stepping motor-based autofocus system which is quick for stills and delivers near-silent autofocus transitions for shooting video.

There are no physical switches on the lens barrel, so swapping between focus modes means dipping into the camera's menu. The lens isn't fully weather-sealed, but has a rubber weather-seal ring around its mounting plate. It comes complete with a lens hood, a rarity for Nikon's budget lenses.

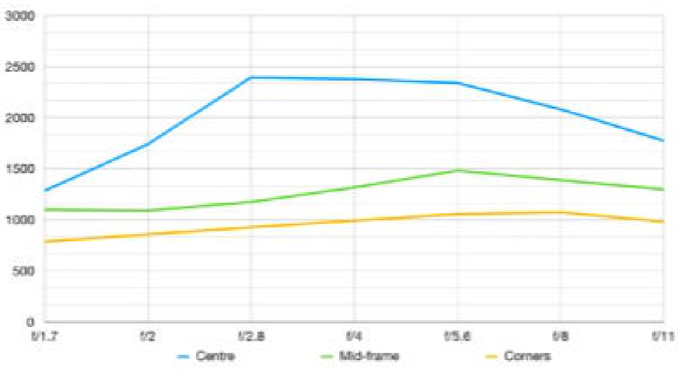
Performance

Like most own-brand Nikon Z system lenses, the Z DX 24mm is impressive. Autofocus is quick and accurate, and in our tests centre-sharpness was pretty good even wide-open at f/1.7, and very good at f/2.8 and narrower apertures. Corner sharpness was lacklustre at f/1.7, but came on song at f/4.

The fast aperture enables fast shutter speeds under low lighting, but there's no optical Vibration Reduction, and given the lack of in-body stabilisation that's an issue when using narrower apertures. Contrast and clarity are good even when shooting wide-open and, overall, the performance is satisfying for a compact, lightweight lens.

Matthew Richards

SHARPNESS



Sharpness in the centre of the frame is pretty good wide open at f/1.7, and impressive at apertures of f/2.8 and narrower. For the best sharpness towards the edges and corners of the frame you'll need to stop down to at least f/4.

FRINGING 0.63

Colour fringing is negligible at f/1.7. Technically, it gets a little worse as you stop down through the aperture range, but it's still minimal even at f/11, even without automatic in-camera correction.

DISTORTION 2.27

Pincushion distortion can be noticeable with in-camera correction disabled, but it's minor compared with many recent lenses for mirrorless cameras, for which automatic correction can't be disabled.

VERDICT

With its compact and lightweight construction, and an 'effective' 36mm focal length in full-frame terms, this lens is the perfect companion to any Nikon Z DX body, ideal for street photography and walkabout shooting. Its bright aperture helps to enable a tight depth of field for close-ups, as well as fast shutter speeds even in low light. All in all, it's a very versatile lens offering impressive performance at a competitive price.

★★★★½

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